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ABSTRACT

This research derives from the proposition that a helping relationship influences the helper's perceptions of the recipient, and that the perceptual consequences are not necessarily positive. It was hypothesized that persons who help tend to underestimate the ability of the recipient. In a 2 X 2 factorial design, subjects (48 college males) performed comparable actions which either could or could not help another person (a confederate) who either succeeded or failed at a task. Subjects who helped perceived the recipient as less competent for related tasks and as less competent in other situations. Within the help condition, subjects who attributed a greater influence to their help perceived the recipient as lower in ability. The results, together with several other considerations, suggest that a helping relationship creates a bias toward helper perceptions of low recipient ability. (Author)

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Perceptual Consequences of Helping Another Person

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Abstract

This research derives from the proposition that a helping relationship influences the helper's perceptions of the recipient, and that the perceptual consequences are not necessarily positive. It was hypothesized that persons who help tend to underestimate the ability of the recipient. In a 2 X 2 factorial design, subjects (48 college males) performed comparable actions which either could or could not help another person (a confederate) who either succeeded or failed at a task. Subjects who helped perceived the recipient as less competent for related tasks and as less competent in other situations. Within the help condition, subjects who attributed a greater influence to their help perceived the recipient as lower in ability. The results, together with several other considerations, suggest that a helping relationship creates a bias toward helper perceptions of low recipient ability.

Perceptual Consequences of Helping Another Person

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This study derives from the proposition that (a) the conditions of a helping relationship influence the helper's perceptions of the recipient, and (b) the perceptual consequences of helping are not necessarily positive. A review of literature concerning helpers' perceptions of recipients' ability and personality (Wills, Note 1) indicates that these perceptions sometimes are rather negative, and several studies in this literature suggest that perceptions become more negative as a result of actual helping experience. Several considerations raise the question of whether these perceptions are accurate or warranted (Wills, Note 1). The present study was conducted to elucidate one possible mechanism through which a helping relationship may influence the helper's perceptions of the recipient's ability. The study employed a laboratory paradigm in which subjects performed comparable actions that either could or could not help a target person.

It was hypothesized that persons who help will arrive at perceptions of lower ability, as compared to persons who do not help and who observe an identical performance by the target person. This hypothesis derives from the following reasoning. It was assumed that the act of helping creates a perceptual dilemma for the helper; as he or she observes the recipient's performance while receiving help, it is not clear what part of this performance is attributable to the influence of help, and what part to the recipient's ability. It seems unlikely that the helper deals with

this ambiguity by discounting or minimizing the influence of help; instead, it seems more likely that the helper will attribute a substantial influence to the help he or she has provided.

Consider then the perceptions of subjects who do or do not help and observe identical performances by helped and nonhelped persons respectively. To the extent that subjects who help attribute a substantial part of the recipient's performance to help provided, they must attribute less to the recipient's ability, and thus must perceive the target person as lower in ability for the task at hand. When the helper attempts to generalize beyond the immediate situation and predict the target person's performance in other situations, the same perceptual ambiguity is encountered, and the helper probably tends to generalize the impression obtained from the helping situation; it follows that persons who help will perceive the target person as less competent in other situations. To summarize the hypothesis, it was predicted that subjects who help, as compared to those who do not help, will perceive the target person as less competent for related tasks and as needing more assistance to perform effectively in other situations.

The experiment also considered two other possible perceptual consequences of helping. There has been a suggestion that help increases liking for the recipient (cf. Schopler & Compere, 1971), and so measures of liking were included as dependent variables. There also has been the suggestion that persons engage in ego-defensive attribution, although this concept has had a difficult experimental history (Miller & Ross, 1975; Ross, Bierbrauer, & Polly, 1974). A manipulation of success or failure by the target person was included in the design, to examine for the possibility of "defensive attribution" effects.

Procedure

The experiment was presented as a study of problem solving, to avoid the possibility of evoking stereotyped attitudes about helping. Subjects were recruited for a study titled "Personality and Guidelines as Factors in Problem Solving" and told that one person, termed the Consultant, would select generalized guidelines that might "stimulate flexible thinking" by another person, termed the Problem Solver, whose assignment was to work on two brain-teaser problems. The subject always was assigned (supposedly at random) to the role of Consultant; subjects were 48 college males, recruited from a university population and compensated for their participation. The role of Problem Solver always was assigned to a confederate; the confederates were two male students, 20 and 21 years old respectively, who were paid to enact a standardized role.

The design of the experiment was 2 X 2 factorial, with the variable of help vs. no help crossed with a manipulation of the success vs. failure of the confederate in solving problems. The help variable was manipulated as follows. Instructions stated that the Problem Solver should work on a problem until he thought he was "not making any further progress," whereupon he should write his "current state of thinking" on a report form and send the report to the Consultant. The Consultant (i.e., the subject) was instructed to study each progress report, select from a list of 26 generalized guidelines the one he thought would be "most appropriate" at that point, and write the guideline on a standard form. In the help condition, the subject was instructed to return both the progress report and the recorded guideline to the Problem Solver. In the no help condition, the subject was instructed to return the progress report but to keep the

recorded guideline; the rationale for this was that the guidelines he selected would be tested for actual effectiveness in a later experiment.

The progress reports sent by the Problem Solver (i.e., the confederate) were preprogrammed. For each of two problems the confederate sent five reports in 10 minutes. The first four reports were the same for all subjects, the first report indicating no progress, and the next three indicating progress toward a solution. For each problem the last report constituted the success/failure manipulation; in the success condition, for each problem the fifth report presented a solution, whereas in the failure condition, for each problem the fifth report indicated no solution.

After two problems had been worked on, the subject completed a questionnaire to describe the Problem Solver, who supposedly was completing a similar questionnaire to describe himself (so as to provide information about "the role of personality factors in problem solving"). The dependent variable measures included (a) estimations of the Problem Solver's performance on related problems, both with and without assistance; (b) estimations of how much assistance the Problem Solver would need to perform effectively in each of five other situations; and (c) personality trait ratings for the dimensions of Ability, Creativity, and Likability and for the attributes Hard-Working, Cooperative, and Independent. Manipulation check ratings were included to index the perceived difficulty of the problems, the perceived contribution of guidelines to the Problem Solver's performance, and several aspects of subjects' reactions to the experiment.

Debriefing interviews indicated very little suspicion. No subject labeled the experiment as a study of helping or expressed reservations about the confederate; thus, no subject was dropped for reasons of suspicion.

Results

Preliminary analysis indicated no significant confederate effect, so data for the two confederates were pooled. Manipulation check data indicated that experimental conditions were comparable and manipulations perceived as intended. Most important, subjects in the help condition perceived that their suggestion of guidelines had made a substantial contribution to the Problem Solver's performance. In a percentage partition of this performance, the mean rated contribution for the Guidelines factor was 24.4%, which is significantly greater than zero, t (23) = 10.6, $p < .001$. Probability estimates of the Problem Solver's performance on related tasks provide the difference score [probability of solving with assistance - probability of solving without assistance], an index of the perceived effectiveness of the guidelines. The mean d score was .21, and analysis of variance indicated that estimations of assisted and unassisted performance were significantly different, F (1, 44) = 92.4, $p < .001$.

The hypothesis that subjects in the help condition will perceive the confederate as lower in ability was strongly supported by several measures. For estimates of the Problem Solver's performance on related problems, presented in Table 1, a significant main effect occurred for the help

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Insert Table 1 about here

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variable, F (1, 44) = 12.6, $p < .001$, with the confederate estimated in the help condition as less likely to solve related problems. A comparable effect occurred for subjects' estimates of the Problem Solver's performance in other situations, presented in Table 2; as predicted, in the help condition the confederate was estimated as needing more assistance to perform

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Insert Table 2 about here

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effectively, F (1, 44) = 9.6, $p < .005$. A further analysis of these data, presented in Table 3, indicates how attributions about the recipient's

Insert Table 3 about here

performance were related to perceptions of his ability. For this analysis, data from the help condition are blocked into high- and low-attribution groups according to subjects' ratings of the contribution of guidelines to the Problem Solver's performance. For estimations of performance without assistance, subjects in the high-attribution group made lower probability estimates, indicating that they perceived the recipient as lower in ability; however, these subjects also concluded that the performance of the (less competent) recipient would be enhanced greatly by their suggestions, and so for estimations of performance with assistance, these subjects made higher probability estimates. Thus, analysis of variance indicated no main effect, but instead a significant interaction between the attribution blocking and the with-assistance/without-assistance factor, F (1, 20) = 8.0, $p < .025$. For estimations of performance in other situations a main effect was noted for the attribution blocking, with subjects in the high-attribution group estimating that the recipient would need more assistance to perform effectively; the effect of the attribution blocking for this measure was only marginally significant, F (1, 20) = 3.9, $p < .10$.

The success/failure variable had several effects on perceptions of the confederate, who when he failed was rated as less likely to solve related problems ($p < .001$) and also as lower in trait ability ($p < .05$), lower in creativity ($p < .05$), less independent ($p < .025$), and less likable ($p < .01$). No evidence of defensive attribution was noted, nor did help influence liking for the recipient, so these will not be further discussed.

Discussion

The results provide evidence of the hypothesized attribution process and its predicted perceptual consequences. Given identical performances to observe, subjects who helped (as compared to those who did not help) arrived at perceptions of lower ability on the part of the confederate. Moreover, this effect was greater to the extent that the subject attributed the recipient's performance to the influence of help. Thus, the results indicate that the act of helping does indeed create a perceptual dilemma for the helper, and that this dilemma is resolved in the manner predicted.

In considering the external validity of these findings, one should note that in the present experiment the helper's perceptions of the recipient were based entirely upon his observations of the latter's performance while receiving help. This experiment was not designed to include information about the confederate's performance before and after receiving help; however, it is important to note that the conditions of the experiment are exactly the conditions of many naturalistic helping relationships, in which the helper's impressions of the client may be based on personal interviews and observations. In addition, although a professional helping agent may have access to several sources of information about the client (e.g., referral reports, test data), it is important to note that the various sources may not be weighted equally by the helper. Impressions based on face-to-face interaction with the client probably are more immediate and compelling than written data, and hence may be strongly weighted in judgments about the client. Nisbett & Borgida (1975) have demonstrated that subjects attach much more importance to concrete, case-specific information than to abstract statistical information, and

several other studies have found that information salience has a strong influence in determining impressions of others (Hamilton & Fallot, 1974; Taylor & Fiske, 1975). In one case, this was true even though the information most salient to subjects was empirically invalid for the judgment they were making (Royce & Weiss, 1975, Table 5).

It is important also to note that in the context of a professional helping relationship, the helper may tend to sample predominantly negative information about the client. As the helper always confronts the recipient in a help-seeking context, he or she probably tends to sample aspects of the client's behavior which represent low competence (as these are most immediately relevant for ameliorating the client's difficulties), and hence may lack information regarding nonproblem areas. For example, in a study of mentally retarded clients (Segal, 1970) it was noted that:

> A medical diagnosis and a medical model are used to assess the individual's physical and emotional limitations, and as a result social strengths he may have often go unrecognized. The individual's strengths are not always sought because our technology is most effective in describing his weaknesses. (p. 40)

Thus, it may also be true that the perceptions of professional helpers are based on a body of information in which positive aspects are underrepresented.

In conclusion, the present results, as well as several other considerations, suggest that the conditions of a helping relationship create a bias toward helper perceptions of low recipient ability. This may occur not because of ineptness on the part of the helper, but because of the structure of a helping relationship.

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Table 1

Mean Probability of Solving Related Problems,
With and Without Assistance of Guidelines,
for Three Levels of Problem Difficulty

Condition	Problem difficulty level					
	Easier problems		Similar problems		Harder problems	
	With	Without	With	Without	With	Without
Help/success	.93	.72	.78	.45	.57	.28
No help/success	.97	.89	.87	.71	.70	.52
Help/failure	.72	.49	.40	.20	.24	.14
No help/failure	.84	.64	.58	.33	.40	.11

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Assistance Required for Effective
Performance in Other Situations

Help condition	Success condition	
	Success	Failure
Help	18.4	19.9
No help	12.4	16.2

NOTE. Means based on sum of five 7-point scales. Higher score indicates more assistance required for effective performance.

Table 3

Mean Probability of Solving Related Problems,

Blocked by Attribution Groups (Help Condition Only)

Attribution group	Problem difficulty level					
	Easier problems		Similar problems		Harder problems	
	With	Without	With	Without	With	Without
(Help/success cell)[a]						
Low	.92	.80	.73	.55	.57	.43
High	.95	.65	.83	.35	.58	.13
(Help/failure cell)[b]						
Low	.70	.50	.40	.23	.23	.12
High	.75	.48	.40	.17	.25	.17

[a]Mean rated contribution of guidelines for low-attribution group = 17%, for high-attribution group = 34%.

[b]Mean rated contribution of guidelines for low-attribution group = 14%, for high-attribution group = 32%.